

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS - KEDOSHIM

תשפ"ג

Sefer Shemos ends with the construction of the Mishkon. Sefer Vayikroh begins with korbonos. Parshas Shemini describes how Moshe put up the Mishkon, but the Shechinoh did not descend. Finally, after eight days Aharon did the avodoh and the Shechinoh came down. Right after that unbelievable event, Nodov and Avihu suddenly die. Moshe told Aharon that Hashem told him in advance that He will be sanctified by those who are closest to Him. Moshe suspected that he or Aharon will be the ones who will die to sanctify the Mishkon. But, now he realized that Nodov and Avihu were actually greater, and they were chosen to die instead.

What is happening? What was the aveirah of Nodov and Avihu? The posuk says they brought an unauthorized korbon. Chazal give multiple other reasons: They came in to do the avodoh while drunk, they were not married, and they paskened without consulting their rebbe first. But these were the gedolei hador! What were they thinking? And what did Moshe Rabbeinu mean that they were so great?

The Netziv discusses the logic behind the aveiros of not adding or subtracting from the Torah. He says we can understand why a person would attempt to add a mitzvah to the Torah, and we need a separate aveiroh to forbid him to do so. But why do we need a separate aveiroh to prevent a person from removing a mitzvah? If he decides he doesn't want to keep a certain mitzvah, isn't that simply a bitul of that mitzvah? Why is it a separate aveiroh?

The Netziv answers that the issur of detracting from the mitzvos is to declare that one of the mitzvos of the Torah isn't productive for my personal avodas Hashem. I will neglect this mitzvah for the sake of my avodoh – an aveiroh lishmoh.

This is a false view. Every Jew has to serve Hashem by doing all 613 mitzvos. One cannot claim that he is special and should have special privileges. This was the problem of Nodov and Avihu. They didn't get married – no-one was on their level to be married to them. They didn't feel the need to consult with anyone else. They are above everyone and can decide to do their own unique avodoh. This is why they deserved to die. It was to demonstrate that no-one, no matter how great and how special, can decide how he wants to serve Hashem and change the Torah to suit him personally.

Then, after the Torah finishes talking about Nodov and Avihu, the Torah seemingly completely changes direction to talk about kashrus. At the end of this discussion, the posuk concludes that Klal Yisroel have to be kodosh for Hashem is kodosh. This is why we have to keep kashrus. Then the Torah proceeds to talk about taharas hamishpocho, the dinim of tzoraas, and back to tumoh and taharah. It concludes with the warning to stay away from tumoh – a rare example of a s'yog de'Oraisoh.

It would seem that the story of Nodov and Avihu were left far behind, but suddenly, the next parsha starts with Acharei Mos Nodov v'Avihu – why are we mentioning their death again right before the discussion of the avodoh of the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur?

The midrash explains that before you can go into the Kodesh haKodoshim, you have to build yourself up step-by-step through an entire process of kedushoh. First the Torah teaches us how to sanctify food and animals that we eat. There is nothing in this world that doesn't have a mitzvah associated with it – especially areas of physical enjoyment. There is a gemara in Chullin where Yalta, the wife of Rav Nachman teaches us that for every kind of food that is forbidden by

the Torah, there is an equivalent pleasure that is permitted. This means the Torah isn't out to deprive us of enjoyment. The Torah is trying to teach us self-control by giving us limits and parameters to the kinds of pleasures we can have. It tells us some things are off-limits and you have to discipline yourself. It starts with the area of food and continues with taharas hamishpocho. It prevents a person from being totally consumed with taivoh and pleasure.

Then, after you achieve discipline about what goes into your mouth, you need to control what comes out of your mouth and not speak loshon horo. If you can't control it, you get tzoraas. One has to be in control of his personal relationships and the Torah dictates how we discipline our personal relationships. But, kashrus comes first. If you can't control what goes into your mouth you will not control what goes out of your mouth.

If you want to go into the Kodesh haKodoshim, you still need to follow very strict rules and be in control of your physical drives and personal relationships.

The continuation of Acharei Mos discusses the prohibition of the Jews in the desert to eat any meat, unless it was brought to the Mishkon first as a korbon shlomim. He could eat meat, but only if he incorporates it into his avodas Hashem. A non-Jew can only bring a korbon olah but a Jew, whose physical urges and desires are disciplined daily by keeping 613 mitzvos, can use physical pleasure to enhance his avodoh. A non-Jew doesn't have this discipline. When he approaches avodas Hashem, it has to have no element of physicality – it has to be an olah. Otherwise, he will be distracted and preoccupied by the physical pleasure aspect and not the avodas Hashem.

In the desert, Klal Yisroel were on the level of nevi'im. The Rambam in Shemonah Perakim says they were on this level of nevi'im for the entire 40 years they were in the desert. Being on that madreigoh, they had to eat all their meat as part of a korbon shlomim. We are not on that level and we are allowed to eat meat without bringing a korbon. But we still have to elevate all our eating pleasure by keeping halacha.

Then the parsha goes back to arayos. We live in a world that is twisted and corrupted by taivoh beyond description. The pesukim at the end of Parshas Bereishis describe how the generation of the mabbul first became wealthy and they used that wealth to pursue a life of taivoh. They first obsessed over natural, permitted pleasures and when that did not satisfy them they went to forbidden natural taivos. Then they exhausted the natural pleasures and moved on to unnatural pleasures. Once you start to focus on pleasure for its own sake, it knows no limits and it completely preoccupies you.

The parsha of arayos starts with a warning: not to engage in the immoral abominations of Egypt where you once lived, and of Canaan where you are going to live. The Ohr HaChaim asks: why does the Torah have to remind us that we once lived in Egypt and we are going to be living in Canaan? He answers that the Torah is coming to dispel a possible misconception one might have. One might be tempted to argue that he can only be expected to keep the laws of arayos in a Torah environment where the society is pure and holy. But how can he be expected to keep these mitzvos while living in societies where these behaviors are totally normal? This is why the Torah emphasizes Egypt and Canaan. The Torah is quite aware of the level of corruption of these nations which Jews lived among, and is still requiring that we remain pure and unaffected by their immoral culture. The Torah demands that

we not follow the culture of the nations we are surrounded by. We have our own nation and our own culture. A Jew has to know he is a Jew. The Taz says that at the end of the day, the obligation to wear a kippah is because it makes us look different than the non-Jews. A Jew needs to make a statement that he doesn't belong to their society. That is one of the results of always keeping one's head covered. We send a message. I don't belong to you.

The problem with the media and internet is that the whole world is at your disposal and you have so many ways presented to you to identify with various aspects of non-Jewish culture. But we have our own values and our own lifestyle and our own culture.

Then we have the parsha of arayos which starts with the unique mitzvah de'Oraishoh of lo sikrivu – which is a fence – to prevent you from doing something more severe. The Rambam says physical contact with an ervah is already an issur de'Oraishoh even before actual relations. In the minyan hamitzvos hakotzor, the Rambam adds all the various ways that arayos can preoccupy your mind as part of the issur de'Oraishoh of lo sikrivu. This is natural human tendency to be preoccupied with arayos and this is what non-Jewish society is completely obsessed with. And still, the Torah expects us to resist this social norm. We have our own norms.

It is interesting that we read this parsha of arayos on Yom Kippur at minchah – the holiest day of the year when we are preoccupied with fasting and teshuvoh! We are being uplifted, but the gemara says we still have to worry about all the pretty women in the ezras noshim who are dressed up for Yom Tov. Just imagine being in the Beis Hamikdash and witnessing the avodoh of the Kohen Godol, hearing the Shem Hameforash and watching him go into the Kodosh haKodoshim. And when it is all done, it is time for minchah – and we read about the issur of arayos!

Every generation has its unique nisayon. Our generation has the biggest nisayon because we live in a society which is completely preoccupied and obsessed with zhus. The craziness just gets worse and worse with every passing year. This is why we need gedolim and protective fences.

The next parsha is Kedoshim. The Rambam says there is a mitzvah to be kodosh because we need to imitate Hashem's middoh of kedushoh. How does the Rambam define the mitzvah of Kedoshim Tihyu? The Rambam discusses the issur of lo sosuru which we mention every day in Krias Shema. In Sefer Hamitzvos he says that we have to limit our thought processes so as not to go over the boundary of beliefs. We also have to limit our pursuit of physical pleasure. We can't become preoccupied with our physical pleasures. We need to be preoccupied by Torah and thoughts about Hashem.

There is an interesting Tosfos in Brochos that says you don't need to make a new birkas haTorah every time you sit down to learn Torah throughout the day. The Ri compares it to the fact that we don't need to make a new brocho every time we enter the sukkah throughout the day. Why not? The main mitzvah of sukkah is to make the sukkah your home. This is a basic mental process. It is because I know where I live. I am rooted there and it is always in the back of my mind – even when I leave my house. Therefore a brocho when I eat suffices. I am making the sukkah my home. I don't forget where my home is. So too, a Jew's

mental home is always in Torah. He never leaves it even though he is not actively learning all day. Every time he sits down to learn he is simply returning to his automatic mode of thinking. Unfortunately, in today's world, people get confused where their mental home is. This is why every morning, I make a brocho and declare that my mental home is thinking about Torah. This is what Kedoshim Tihyu is. We have to decide who we are and what makes us a nation. Are we a holy nation or a "start-up nation"?

Hashem says He has one group of people out of all the billions of people in this world who represent Him in this world. His name is carried by us and by how we live. We cannot be preoccupied with fancy steaks and expensive bottles of wine.

We need continual reminders of our Jewish identity. We put on tzitzis and we read the parsha of tzitzis which tells us that we need to have constant reminders not to follow our hearts and our eyes and not to get preoccupied with physicality. To remain kodosh.

These parshiyos tell us what it means to be a Jew – we are a mamleches kohanim and goy kodosh. We have a special connection to Hashem and it allows us to live in all these corrupt societies and not be affected by them. We know we are different and we are separate.

The Ohr HaChaim points out that this mitzvah to be kodosh is not a high madreigoh only for the tzaddikim. The Rambam says imitating Hashem is an absolute obligation upon every Jew.

We live in incredibly difficult times. The dangers and the temptations of the internet are overwhelming our generation. Rav Matisyahu Solomon said once that if Chazal were alive today, they would make an issur yichud with a computer.

A few years ago, a therapist I was friendly with asked me to speak to a bochur who he is not succeeding with. The bochur was obsessed with internet pornography and he claimed he couldn't break free from it. He was stuck. I told him I simply don't believe him. The Rambam says every human being – with the exception of uniquely evil reshaim – has bechiroh chofshis. Don't flatter yourself that you are such a big rosho on the level of Pharaoh and Nevuchadnezzar that Hashem took away your bechiroh! You have the power to choose how to behave.

Rabbeinu Yonah adds that bechiroh is a mitzvah – to decide what you want to do with your life instead of just being led through life automatically by social and emotional forces. The Rambam in Shemonah Perakim says bechirah extends to everything. You can mold your personality and your character traits by the choices you make. You can decide who you want to be – what to think and what to feel about everything in life – not just what you do with your body. You don't discover your "true inner self" which can't be changed – like the psychologists say. You can make yourself into the person you decide you want to be.

But bechiroh doesn't mean you can just automatically start to do the right thing all the time immediately. When you are out of control in a certain area, you start by taking the right steps to get yourself under control. You slowly and gradually fight your habits and work on yourself until you get yourself under control. It applies to all kinds of addictions people have today – when you lose control, it is always possible to take control.